

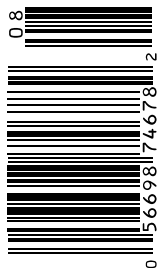
SOJOURNERS

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Corita Kent
changed
the world

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America's Narrow Gate

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From the Editor

Even apart from the fabricated battles of the culture wars, seeking the proper balance between church and state in U.S. public life has always been a contentious matter. The Constitution prohibits governmental establishment of any religion and protects the free exercise of all religious belief. But, as Da'Shawn Mosley explains in this issue, when it comes to people of faith in public service, not all religions are created equal.

Since the Puritans' "city upon a hill" and before, Christian imagery and beliefs have been cornerstones of American self-understanding, and the so-called "separation" of church and state has been arguably more honored in the breach, as evidenced by the nearly unbroken line of Christian presidents. Almost all Americans—including, it is hoped, most Christians—would strongly oppose a religious litmus test for public office. But the real challenge, as Mosley points out, seems to be whether those beliefs hold true when Muslims join citizens of other faiths and no faith in seeking the keys to the city on the hill.

RESPONSE

Any More Ideas?

"The importance of embracing vulnerability, as Sharon V. Betcher promotes ("Bearing the Brunt of Corporeality," May 2021), cannot be overstated," Arden Mahlberg wrote via email. "It was, tellingly, the most vulnerable person who stopped to help the man in need in the Good Samaritan story." In "Why Is Jeff Bezos Targeting Public Libraries?" (June 2021), Danny Duncan Collum explains what happens when profit is placed before the public good and public libraries. Reader Virginia Morse responded, "During the pandemic, I've continued to use my library as much as they are able to serve me. If I do [buy books], I purchase through independent booksellers." Morse had one request: "Any more ideas as to what else this retiree can do, as an individual, will be appreciated."

Write us: response@sojo.net



"THERE IS NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN, BUT THERE ARE NEW SUNS."

Octavia E. Butler
Author

CONTRIBUTING



Christina Colón

"Puerto Rico is a place that is close to my heart," says *Sojourners* assistant editor Christina Colón (p. 12). "It's been a listening and learning process to know a history that has been intentionally obscured," she says. "But I need to, because this is my history, and being able to share that, to tell people about that, is important to me." As an editor Colón loves working with writers "in a collaborative way to create a piece that informs and changes narratives and challenges perceptions."



Sophie Vodvarka

Working as a journalist based in Chicago, Sophie Vodvarka (p. 28) loves stories that "speak truth to power." Recently, she has focused her reporting on women who have survived abuse in the Catholic Church. "I'm just amazed by the strength of anyone who is a survivor in a church institution [and] has the courage to come forward," she says. Vodvarka grew up in Lincoln, Neb., and has a great love for Balkan music, which she gained while living in Poland and the Czech Republic.

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Year building began on Etchmiadzin Cathedral in Armenia, one of the world's earliest domed churches

45,000

Capacity of the world's largest finished cathedral, Basilica of Our Lady of Aparecida, in Brazil

13 million

Annual visitors to Notre Dame in Paris before the 2019 fire

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The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

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1

MOBILIZING HOPE

BY ADAM RUSSELL TAYLOR

**‘BE STRONG AND
COURAGEOUS’**

How has the pandemic changed you? This question can feel loaded, as though our answers should contain revelatory insights or transformational changes in our mindsets or lifestyles. My answers have varied. Since the pandemic forced my intense travel schedule to come to a screeching halt, I’ve realized just how unsustainable that schedule, with its impact on my family life, had become. I look forward to returning to traveling soon, but I am determined to be much more selective about it. I also often reflect on the ways that my family deepened our love for nature during the pandemic, breathing in the beauty of God’s creation. These are just a few of my answers.

But for some of us, the question elicits anxiety about going back to the broken “normal” of pre-pandemic times. For many, lurking behind the question is a

**THE PANDEMIC
AMPLIFIED A
PREEXISTING MENTAL
HEALTH CRISIS IN
THIS NATION.**

“I KNOW HOW DEBILITATING THE FOG OF DEPRESSION CAN BE.”



Adam Russell Taylor is president of Sojourners.

recognition that some of the ways COVID-19 has changed us may not be for the better, and some of our struggles during this time may not simply go away because we are vaccinated and can now resume social activities. Sadly, the pandemic amplified a preexisting mental health crisis in this nation. A *New York Times* article by organizational psychologist Adam Grant popularized a new term: “languishing,” which describes the state of feeling aimless, joyless, and unfocused. This captures a wide continuum between flourishing and full-scale depression. Languishing can also have a deep spiritual dimension: We feel a sense of spiritual fatigue and emptiness or even feelings of abandonment and anger toward God. They can be compounded by the inability during the pandemic for most of us to experience in-person fellowship and worship.

As someone who has battled with situational depression in my life, I know how debilitating the fog of depression can be, and amid the pandemic I resolved to do everything in my power to avoid slipping into this vicious cycle. But too many others were not as fortunate, and many lack the lifelines of social support and mental health services. To make matters worse, mental health continues to be stigmatized, including within the church. This means that we often fail to catch the warning signs and are ill-equipped to extend vital—even lifesaving—supports.

As we come out of the wilderness of the pandemic, we must proactively address mental and spiritual health, encouraging our fellow congregants and loved ones to identify the warning signs and help them access mental health resources. We also must ensure these resources are accessible, particularly for marginalized communities and people lacking access to health coverage. We'll need to give ourselves and others a great deal of grace, knowing that some of the habits we developed during the pandemic will not be vanquished overnight. As we individually and collectively heal from the trauma and grief of this wilderness period, we can take heart in the promise that God gave to Joshua as the Israelites were about to enter the Promised Land, telling them to “Be strong and courageous ... for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” This is a timeless word of encouragement that we could all hear anew. ✦



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WILL PUERTO RICO BECOME THE 51ST STATE?

There are more Puerto Ricans living on the mainland than on the island.
What will happen to the land of our ancestors?



2

Territory. Colony. Commonwealth. “An island surrounded by water, big water.” *Boriquén*.

In 2017, when Hurricane María hit and Puerto Ricans were left without power for months, people around the world Googled: “What is Puerto Rico?”

A strip of land 100 miles long and 35 miles wide in the Caribbean Sea. Home to nearly 3.2 million people, “proud people,” as my *abuela* says. It is an island of people in *la brega*, an expression without a translation that encapsulates “a state of mind,” Alana Casanova-Burgess explains in *La Brega*, a WYNC podcast series. It’s the feeling of always being in the struggle, the hustle. “It shows us something about our ‘Puerto Ricanness,’ our history, our present,” she says. “And maybe where we’re headed.”

This year, Steven Spielberg will release his screen revival of the hit musical *West Side Story*. It’s been 60 years since Rita Moreno as Anita sang, “I like to be in America” from a staged New York City rooftop (muddying the waters as to whether Puerto Rico was “America”). As a new Anita emerges, Congress will debate the Puerto Rico Statehood Ad-

mission Act, introduced in March. If the act is approved, then a vote will be held in Puerto Rico on whether to become a state.

Upon “winning” Puerto Rico and the Philippines from Spain in 1898, the U.S. saw Puerto Rico as an outlet for goods and a strategic naval location. In the 1901 case *Downes v. Bidwell*, which followed on the heels of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the court decided that Puerto Rico should not become a state, but rather live as an “unincorporated territory” of the U.S. “Separate, but also not equal. Sort of,” writes Ed Morales in *Fantasy Island*.

In 1952, Puerto Rico got another name: *estado libre asociado* (“a free associated state”). A commonwealth, of sorts. It was a status originating from the island’s first elected governor, Luis Muñoz Marín. “In order to massage the continued colonial interests of the U.S. in Puerto Rico and present a sovereign future to his residents, Marín came up with this label that sounded like decolonization,” Casanova-Burgess says. It was neither statehood, nor independence. It was a promised third way: access to U.S. riches and preservation of self-governance. But neither came true.

In 2014, Puerto Rico entered a debt crisis. Two years later, Congress appointed a U.S.-based financial oversight board that slashed funds from health care and education to repay mainland creditors. According to the U.S. Census, 43 percent of those residing on the island live below the poverty line. The median income between 2015 and 2019 was \$20,539.

Today, there are more Puerto Ricans living on the mainland than there are on the island itself, most of my family among them. Puerto Rico lost a ninth of its population in the last decade, the largest drop of any state or territory counted in the U.S. census. We, the descendants of the diaspora, have become like the island herself: belonging *to*, but no longer part *of*. Our presence on the mainland doesn’t answer the question of what should happen to the land of our ancestors. Nor what it will mean for us, as a people, should Puerto Rico become a state. Will the U.S.-induced debt be forgiven? Will the public health and school systems be rebuilt? Will reparations be paid for past harm? Will we finally acknowledge the truth of the “failed colonial experiment” the U.S. government retains control of today?

“It hurts to say [Puerto Rico] is a col-

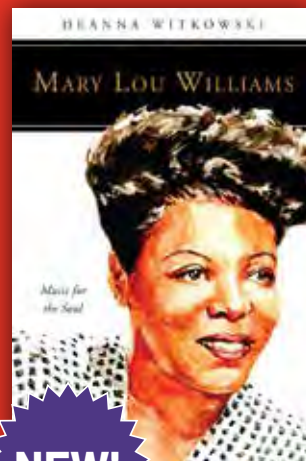
“IT IS WE WHO MUST DECIDE HOW TO RECOVER WHAT HAS ALWAYS BEEN OURS,” SAID ISHBEL CORA RODRÍGUEZ.

ony because we know that colonies are violent and do not prosper,” said Ishbel Cora Rodríguez, a student at the University of Puerto Rico in San Juan. “But it is our reality ... it is the only reality I have ever known.”

When I asked Rodríguez what she hopes for the island, she envisioned an “anti-colonial, just, anti-racist, and feminist Puerto Rico.” She imagines a Puerto Rico with free and accessible health services, food sovereignty, gender justice, affordable housing, public transportation, and environmental protections. Most of all, she dreams of a Puerto Rico that is free. “We are the ones who little by little have seen the place where we were born being taken away from us,” she said. “It is we who must decide how to recover what has always been ours.”

Nearly two years ago, on a trip to Puerto Rico, my father and I stood in the dark listening to the chorale of the *coquí*. There were once millions upon millions of these small frogs across the island. Today many of their species are endangered, threatened by environmental disregard and deforestation. Yet those left continue to sing. ♦

Christina Colón is assistant editor of *Sojourners* magazine.



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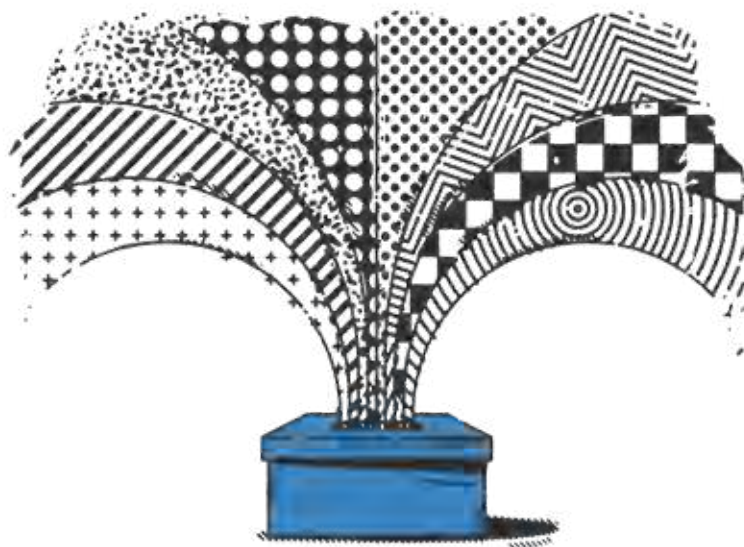
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COMMENTARY

BY MYRNA PÉREZ



VOTERS WANT TO VOTE

Unprecedented state-level legislation aims to disenfranchise Americans.

In **backlash** to historic voter turnout, as of late May state legislators had introduced 389 bills to restrict voting in 48 states in the 2021 legislative sessions. The barrage of suppressive bills has been different from previous years in various ways. The sheer number of bills, the sweeping nature of the proposals, the procedural shenanigans, and the brazenness of lawmakers' intent makes this like few legislative attempts in memory.

"Restrict" means the legislation would make it harder for Americans to register, stay on the rolls, and/or vote, as compared to existing state law. Most of these bills take aim at absentee voting and expanding voter ID requirements. Some would make voter registration harder, expand voter roll purges, and reduce early voting. Others seek to undermine the power of local officials and, in some cases, establish new criminal penalties to target those who run our elections.

Several of the concerning bills are bundled—a big number of anti-voter bills rolled into one. Take Georgia for example. Lots of people have heard about Georgia outlawing the provision of a bottle of water or a snack to people waiting in line to vote. But there's more. Polling sites on wheels (mobile voting) are now effectively illegal in the state. Many voters who plan to vote by mail will be required to provide a driver's license, social security number, state identification number, or a copy of identifying documentation. Ballot drop boxes will have to be located inside elections offices or early voting sites, likely resulting in the loss of convenient voting locations. Some provisions may exacerbate existing cyber-vulnerabilities or introduce new ones. These laws will

clearly have a detrimental effect on the political voice of voters of color, especially those in the Black community. Mobile voting in Georgia, for example, was only used in Fulton County. That's the home of Atlanta, which has the largest Black population of any city in the state.

We also cannot ignore the anti-democratic procedural moves used. In Georgia, for example, legislators added new sections to a bill under review one hour before the committee had to consider it, even though the additions were big ones. In Texas, the House Elections Committee chairperson sought to force his committee into an immediate vote on a bill after he deleted its contents entirely and substituted in language from a completely different bill.

Ultimately, these changes come back to demographics and the increasing political power wielded by communities of color. It is hard to reach any other conclusion than that some lawmakers are more interested in constraining the power of new voices in our electorate and insulating themselves from accountability in future elections than in being stewards of democracy. To mitigate the damage from this wave of anti-voter laws from legislatures and block these suppressive attempts in the future, we need Congress to pass the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act and the For the People Act.

Voters, thanks in large part to people of color and young people, broke election participation records last November, reaching 66.8 percent turnout. This constitutes the highest turnout in a century and arguably the most diverse electorate in U.S. history. Americans sent a clear message: Voters care about voting.

While 13 states have passed voter expansion bills, and such bills are moving forward in at least 25 states, legislators from Florida to Georgia to Arizona to Texas and beyond are wasting legislative resources and trying to make our elections less free, fair, and accessible.

Our legislative process should be used to expand enfranchisement—and these legislators know better. Voters are supposed to choose their politicians, not the other way around. ✱

Myrna Pérez is director of the Voting Rights and Elections program at the Brennan Center for Justice and a *Sojourners* contributing editor.

I

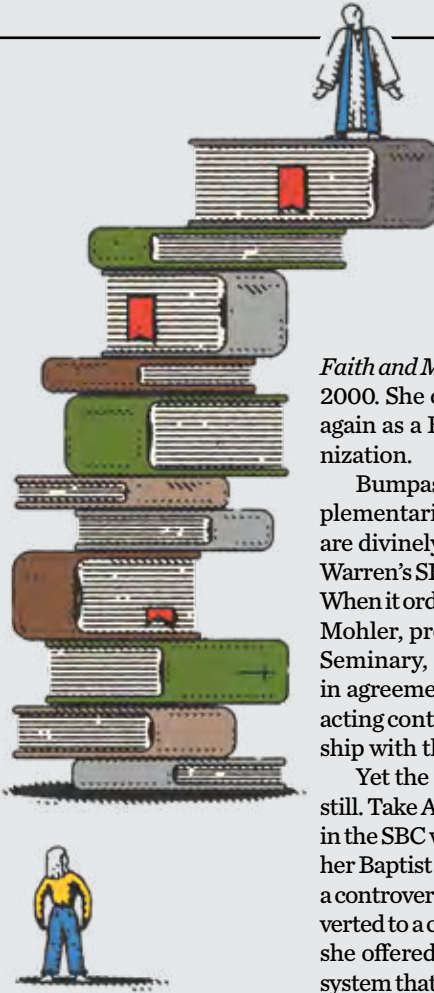
‘COMPLEMENTARIANISM’ IS MORE COSTLY THAN YOU THINK

I remember her green dress. She stood in center stage, shoulders barely clearing the pulpit. She was preaching, except the Southern Baptist Church didn’t call it preaching. As a missionary returning from two years in Jordan in the mid-1980s, Martha Bumpas was giving her “testimony.”

Bumpas was, I think, the first woman I heard speak from the pulpit. She sounded so full of hope. As her friendship with my family deepened, God’s calling on her life deepened too. She began to pursue a calling into full-time ministry.

Her timing proved poor. In 1988, Dorothy Patterson delivered a paper at the annual meeting of what was then the Southern Baptist Historical Association that articulated a “biblical theology of women’s submission to men’s authority,” as historian Elizabeth H. Flowers tells it. Patterson’s sharp wit—despite her historically inaccurate argument—won the Southern Baptist day. Ten years later she won again, this time on the floor of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) annual meeting as she fought for the inclusion of language on women’s “gracious submission” in the *Baptist Faith and Message*, the repository of doctrine for Southern Baptists. Patterson succeeded in narrowing options for SBC women like Bumpas: Baptist seminaries deterred women from master of divinity degrees and, by 2000, pushed them out of preaching classes. Only men were deemed biblically fit to serve as pastors.

The implications of these SBC changes played out in the real life of Martha Bumpas. She quit seminary, frustrated by her inability to earn an M.Div. She earned a graduate degree from a public university instead. Later she attained a placement through the SBC International Mission Board, but—again—quit after the *Baptist*



Faith and Message stripped women of leadership roles in 2000. She continued serving internationally, but never again as a Baptist and never again with a mission organization.

Bumpas’ story is only a small part of the cost of complementarianism, the theological position that women are divinely called to follow male “headship.” Take Rick Warren’s SBC-affiliated Saddleback Church, for example. When it ordained three women to pastoral ministry, Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, clarified the price tag: Any SBC church not in agreement with limiting the pastoral office to men is acting contrary to scripture and thus no longer in fellowship with the SBC.

Yet the cost of complementarianism can soar higher still. Take Abby Johnson. Like Bumpas, Johnson grew up in the SBC world of Texas. Again, like Bumpas, she has left her Baptist roots—albeit for different reasons. Johnson is a controversial but popular pro-life advocate who has converted to a conservative form of Catholicism. In May 2020, she offered her support for a head-of-household voting system that would undo suffrage for married women. The reason is complementarianism: “In a Godly household, the husband would get the final say,” she explained. The cost of complementarianism, in other words, can even extend to women’s agency as citizens.

Christian patriarchy doesn’t stay confined to Christian spaces. Complementarianism claims to be about biblical faithfulness but costs women their biblical callings. Bumpas got out before she paid too high a price. If Johnson has her way, other women might not be so lucky. ❖

**CHRISTIAN
PATRIARCHY
DOESN'T STAY
CONFINED TO
CHRISTIAN SPACES.**

Beth Allison Barr, author of *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, is professor of history at Baylor University in Texas.

WHEN 'CAN-DO' IS NOT ENOUGH

3



I was a weird kid who faithfully read the syndicated “Hints from Heloise” newspaper column and the household tips in my mom’s many women’s magazines. I loved how a mundane problem in everyday life could be cheerfully solved with vinegar and “elbow grease” or the strategic deployment of a couple of rubber bands.

This was before Martha Stewart famously built an empire providing perfection-oriented household advice, such as mopping tips that note “sparkling floors begin with the correct tools.” In contrast, the advice in my childhood was humbler, with a how-to/can-do spirit that acknowledged that making a home clean and safe, and keeping a family fed, clothed, and nurtured on a budget is difficult and time-consuming.

When I was young, this was still sometimes called “women’s work.” Religious conservatives and organizations such as Focus on the Family added a faith twist—a woman’s role in the home was sacred duty (based on Jesus’ lost parable of the submissive helpmate?). The term “women’s work” is less common now, but studies show that in households where both a male and female partner are employed outside the home full time, the woman is still more likely to do more of the domestic work.

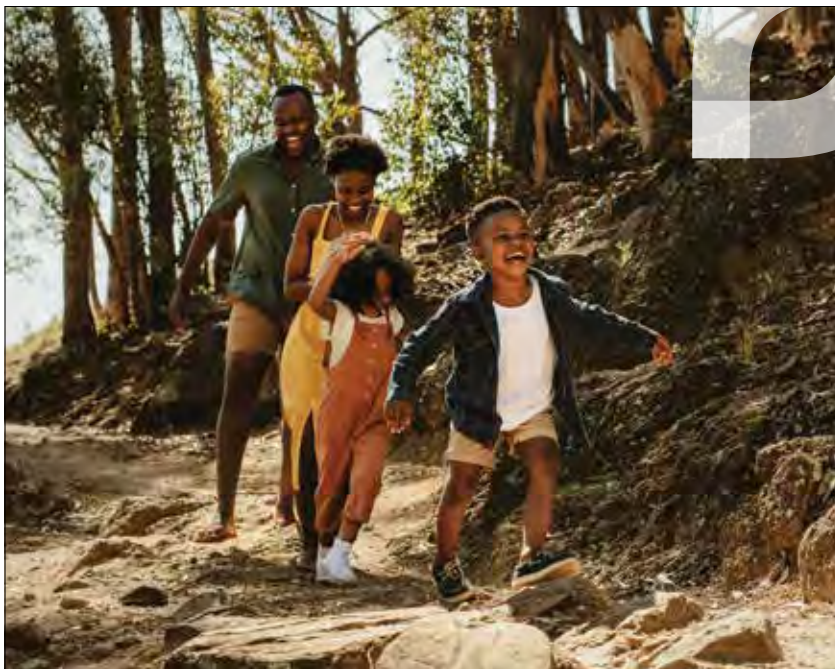
**HOUSEHOLDS ARE WHERE
MANY OF US EXPERIENCE GOD
INCARNATE AT WORK AT THE
GRANULAR LEVEL.**

The sexism that undervalues work performed by women shapes policy and economic forces. Given patriarchy (and white supremacy), when domestic labor is contracted out to house cleaners, nannies, and home health care aides—who are also usually women, often Black and immigrant women—it is often poorly compensated and offers few protections or benefits.

The pandemic has upended much of home and work life. The demands of managing online school, care for babies and toddlers, and working full time from home crushed any remaining semblance of “work-life balance” for many, especially women. And it left many working-class people facing difficult choices between COVID-19 risks at work and feeding their families. All of this is worsened in the U.S. by the lack of holistic public support for child care, long-term care services, and paid leave. The American Rescue Plan COVID relief package, which incentivized businesses to offer paid leave, expanded services to older adults and people with disabilities, and infused billions into the child care sector, offers a model for permanent policies to lift up families and our society as a whole.

Putting a holy glow on home life is not *completely* wrong: Households are where many of us experience God incarnate at work at the granular level. Ideally, home is where all of us—women, men, and non-binary people, children and elders—learn and practice love and justice, mutual care and sacrifice in the nitty-gritty of daily life. Housing, food, rest, and healing aren’t supposed to be merely commodities for Christians. They can be sacramental. But the big issues at the intersection of home and work—how things like low wages, child care needs, lack of sick leave, and market forces affect our domestic lives—are where we seek communal wholeness, not privatized blessing. Those challenges are too big for life hacks or individual solutions. Fixing our fundamentally misguided economic structure will take more than a rubber band and a “can-do” spirit. ♦

Julie Polter is managing editor of *Sojourners* magazine.



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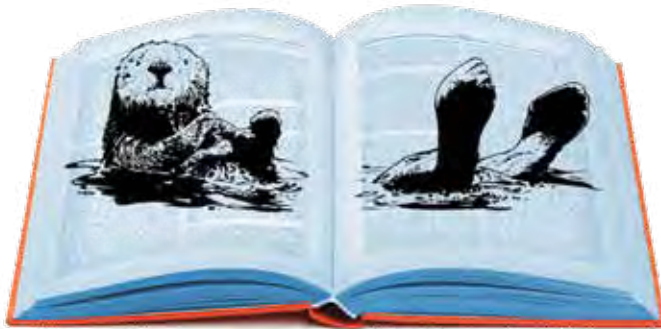
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THE HUNGRY SPIRIT BY ROSE MARIE BERGER

AT PLAY IN THE RIVERS OF THE LORD



Tourists spotted otters in the Potomac River this spring. Not unheard of, but rare. North American river otters are the only otter species in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. For millennia they were an apex species that served as “doctors” for healthy ecosystems by maintaining population levels of fish, frogs, and insects. The Colonial-era transnational fur trade, and its modern-era descendants of land destruction and water pollution, brought otters to the brink of decimation.

Now the otters are returning, a signal that decades of reparatory work to protect the Chesapeake watershed is having modest success.

The word most associated with these agile water weasels is “play.” Play is a fundamental way of interacting in the world; it’s how creatures “practice into being” what we can only imagine at first. Play develops communal trust, agility, resilience, strength, and strategy—and situates the soul firmly in the individual and social body.

For most adult humans, play must be relearned from children and animals. Otters, for example, or 2-year-olds encountering mud puddles. Play involves ingenuity, surprise, paradox. In play, we shift social norms and test others. In communal play, we decenter ourselves.

Western Christianity, however, has developed a theology antagonistic to play and games. And perhaps for good reasons related to the persona of the “game master.”

Many early Christians quite rightly rejected the Roman Circus games. The Roman amphitheater embodied the imperial, enslaving mindset. The circus was the center of Roman worship and governance. The state and crowds punished Christians for treason, illegal gatherings, and apostasy by throwing them into rings with trained gladiators and wild animals (reinforcing Caesar as ruler of humans and nature, life and death).

When Constantine aligned Rome’s temporal power with Christiani-

**WHEN EMPIRE IS “GAME MASTER,”
JESUS-FOLLOWERS SHOULD
INTERROGATE THE “PLAY.”**

ty’s charismatic power—perhaps to secure the support of the masses where the new religion was spreading—such “games” were no longer useful. By the fifth century, the gladiatorial games in the Roman Circus were banned and the training schools abandoned. Of course, as imperial Christendom grew in power, anti-gaming attitudes became problematic because they did not imbue warfare with a holy purpose. Knight training schools in medieval Europe, accompanied by jousts and other martial games, restored the religious fervor needed to fuel the Crusades. When empire is the “game master,” Jesus-followers rightly interrogate the purpose of the “play.”

On the other hand, the biblical narrative is full of political satire using word play, parody, and irony that often serve as tools of class conflict to disarm empire, scatter concentrated power, and dismantle technological “improvements.”

In the Bible, play is also shown as a way of deepening relationships and caring for others. The parables of Jesus and the playful retelling of his ministry (a boy whose lunch of two fish feeds thousands, a wedding saved when jars of water are turned into wine, post-resurrection “disappearing acts”) point to the role of playfulness in creativity, learning, and problem-solving.

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann wrote, “Play as world symbol goes beyond the categories of doing, having, and achieving and leads us to categories of being, of authentic human existence and demonstrative rejoicing in it.”

Let’s look again at the otters in the Potomac. Our modern ziggurats of skyscrapers, sports stadiums, and other “great buildings” (Mark 13:2) cast their reflections on the river. But for a shining moment their mirrored influence is disrupted. A chattering whistle pierces the air. Flashes of fur spin, roll, and dive, splashing water wildly in delight. The otters have returned. The powerful may flock to imperial games, but the otters play for life. ❖

Rose Marie Berger, senior editor of *Sojourners* magazine, is a Catholic peace activist and poet.

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SOJOURNERS

EYEWITNESS

4



**"I BLESSED THE TREES
IN THE FOREST."**

REBUILDING NOTRE DAME

“It was like a part of us was burning. Before being a historical monument, Notre Dame is a church: a place where people are going to pray, celebrate the sacraments, and the presence of Christ in the middle of Paris.

Somebody from Italy asked me if the fire was a sign from God about the church in France. To see how the firefighters worked for days and days, risking their life to save the building... there were Christians praying when the cathedral was burning, and there were other people saying, ‘I’m not Christian but this place is a part of my life.’ The cathedral was a symbol of Christ in the middle of this city, and a sign of a community brought together.

Some private forest owners were asking for donated oaks for the rebuilding of the Notre Dame. They had to be between 100 and 200 years, very straight, could not have knots on the trunks, and had to have a diameter between 60 and 80 centimeters. I spoke about it with the community, saying ‘We’ve been asked to contribute to the rebuilding of the frame of Notre Dame, and I think we should say yes.’

I blessed the trees in the forest—something very simple. I said a prayer for all the people who are working on the reconstruction of the cathedral, asking also for the blessing of God on our community in our participation in this process.

When the forestry expert told me that our two oaks will [help rebuild] the spire, I said, ‘Oh, I love it.’ Because there is an idea of elevation in our contemplative life—trying to elevate the world toward God. I don’t know where our oaks will be, but if we are at the bottom, a little bit hidden, we know that we will support the whole spire, as we are trying to support the world with our prayers.” ✕

Dom Thomas Georgeon is the abbot of the Abbey of La Trappe in France. He spoke with Sojourners’ Jenna Barnett. Françoise Le Gall helped with interpretation.



A JOYOUS REVOLUTION

ENRICHED

It's bad. You don't know what to do when you've got five children or seven nieces and/or uncles or something to read and you don't know what to get it.

and you don't know which way to start to get it. I just get her voice or something
to utuqymme: hofe

there are so many

HE REPEAT ED THE LET TERS OF TH E ALPHAB E OVER ANI VER BESE NG TH E EIGHT



NO TIME AGO
WALKING ALONE
WALKING IN THE DARK
I MET CHRIST
(JESUS) MY HEART
FLOPPED OVER
AND LAY STILL
WHILE HE PASSED (AS
CLOSE AS I WENT YOU
WERE CLOSE BY
MADE OF NOTHING
EXCEPT LOVE

...and she sings and runs and wears bright orange
...and probably do her share of it at the moment...

**102 years after her birth, artists and
activists are still learning from the vision
of Corita Kent. By Cassidy Klein**

Corita Kent serigraphs, these pages: words of prayer (1968),
handle with care (1964), mary does laugh (1964), that
they may have life (1964) © 2021 Estate of Corita Kent /
Immaculate Heart Community / Licensed by Artists Rights
Society, New York

For Sister Mary Corita,

the supermarket parking lot in Hollywood she walked through each day to get to her art studio was filled with “sources.” Grocery advertisements, power lines, cracks in the asphalt, songs from car radios—all of these, to her, were “points of departure” that, when examined in a new way, tell us something about ourselves and God. “There is no line where art stops and life begins,” she wrote.

Corita Kent, a Catholic sister described by Artnet as “the pop art nun who combined Warhol with social justice,” delighted in Los Angeles’ chaotic 1960s cityscape. Her serigraphs (silk-screen prints) wrestle with injustice, racism, poverty, war, God, peace, and love in bursting neon and fluorescent lettering, transforming popular advertisements and songs into statements of hope.

“To create is to relate,” Kent wrote in *Footnotes and Headlines*. “We trust in the artist in everybody. It seems that perhaps there is nothing unholy, nothing unrelated.”

“She broke barriers her whole life, but always with joy,” Nellie Scott, director of the Corita Art Center, told *Sojourners*. “People often call her the joyous revolutionary.”

Kent was born in Iowa in 1918 and raised in a large Catholic family. Her family moved to Hollywood when she was young, and at age 18, Kent joined the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, who ran the high school she attended. She went on to teach art at Immaculate Heart College, becoming head of the art department in 1964.

The changes going on in both the art world and Catholicism excited and inspired Kent. In 1962, the year that Pope John XXIII convened Vatican II, Kent saw the first exhibit of Andy Warhol’s “Campbell’s Soup Cans” paintings and dove into the world of pop art. “New ideas are bursting all around and all this comes into you and is changed by you,” she wrote in *Learning by Heart*.

“She wouldn’t look at [consumer culture] like Warhol or some of the others who were just making an art statement,” John August Swanson, an artist in LA who took Kent’s lettering and design class in 1967, told *Sojourners*. “She was looking at it from, how do we bring this into our spirituality and God’s creation, seeing the gifts we have been given with food and the ordinary?”

Kent was a “bundle of energy, but very gentle,” Susie Reneau told *Sojourners*. Now an artist in San Diego, Reneau was an Immaculate Heart student from 1964 to 1968 and worked with Kent during the summers in her silk-screening studio. “She gave [students] the feeling that we

could do anything, and she demanded a lot of us.”

Swanson was 30 years old when he took Kent’s class, which he said started him on his journey as an artist-activist. “I had low self-esteem and was afraid to do anything,” he said. “And when you went to ask her a question, she would give you all her attention, she made you feel so important. She helped us to not be afraid.”

Kent’s work has seen a resurgence among a new generation of artists and creators. Two fashion designers noted Kent as the major source of inspiration for their spring 2021 lines. *Rebel Hearts*, a 2021 documentary, tells the story of the Sisters of Immaculate Heart and their prophetic challenge to the patriarchy of the Catholic Church. The Corita Art Center, a project of the Immaculate Heart Community, maintains the world’s largest collection of Kent’s artworks and continues Kent’s legacy of education and activism through its social media platforms and events.

“There is this very human desire right now for a collective spirit for change and hope,” Scott says. “People are finding solace in her words.”

As her 1972 print “to love is to expect” says, Kent spoke of hope through “ordinary things,” which, she wrote, are “signs for us of our neighbors’ needs, of our responsibility.”

WE HAVE NO ART

“Mary does laugh,” reads Kent’s 1964 serigraph of the same name, “and she sings and runs and wears bright orange. Today she’d probably do her shopping at the Market Basket.”

This is how Kent imagined the Mother of God when she planned the annual Mary’s Day procession in 1964 for Immaculate Heart College. Flower crowns adorned





the nuns' habits and students in homemade costumes carried vibrant banners inspired by grocery signs as they processed along the palm-treed avenues of Hollywood. Mary's Day, Kent wrote, "grew out of a desire to make Mary more relevant to our time—to dust off the habitual and update the content and form."

To Kent, because of this, Jesus was the original pop artist. "By taking bread out of its ordinary form and presenting it as his body, he originated pop art," she wrote. Her 1962 serigraph "wonderbread" portrays 12 Eucharist wafers in the bright blue, red, and yellow of Wonder Bread packaging. "When you get past making labels for things, it is possible to combine and transform elements into new things," she said. "Look at things until their import, identity, name, use, and description have dissolved."

Bread, sun, and song are woven through Kent's art. "We lift the common stuff—groceries and signs about groceries—out of the everyday and give it a place in our celebration," she wrote of Mary's Day. "And heaven and earth will not be so far apart."

Kent's commercial-sacred pop art medleys nod to the unexpected closeness of heaven and earth in the everyday. The print "workpower, air conditioner" has quotes about collective human dignity from Thomas Merton and Pope John XXIII alongside language used in Chevrolet truck ads. In "for eleanor," the General Mills logo undergoes a holy reinterpretation: "the big G stands for goodness."

Kent saw creating hope as a collective responsibility, an act of radical neighborly love that won't let us give up.

Wavy typeface in the stripy-yellow poster "harness the sun" combines the Zenith radio slogan, "Harnesses the sun to power this," with Beatles lyrics and a quote in Kent's handwriting: "I believe in me through you, I believe in God through you." The print "handle with care" takes a car dealership motto—"see the man who can save you the most"—and overlays it with an e.e. cummings poem about encountering the human Christ.

"There is no irreligiousness in joy," reads the serigraph "juiciest tomato of all," in which Kent likens Mother Mary to a life-giving tomato.

"Up and down highways we see words like 'Cold, clear,

well-water,' 'The best to you each morning,' 'Have a happy day,' 'Sunkist,' 'Del Monte's catsup makes meatballs sing' that read like contemporary translations of the psalms for us to be singing on our way," Kent wrote.

Kent took her students on field trips to art galleries and gas stations, where they would observe the movement and color of life with viewfinders—1-inch-by-1-inch squares cut out of cardboard that act as tools to help "take in a little bit of something, so then you can have a better idea and appreciation for the larger whole," Scott said. "She had this act of slow looking."

Buckminster Fuller, Alfred Hitchcock, designers Charles and Ray Eames, and the Berrigan brothers often

stopped into Kent's art classes. One time Kent drove the class out to the desert to listen to Paul Horn, a flautist, play in the heat and wind, Reneau recalled.

"We have no art," Kent would tell her students. "You have no distinction between what is art and what is not art. You do everything as well as you can."

A PASSION FOR THE POSSIBLE

In the late 1960s, Kent's works took on an urgency in their cry for justice amid the civil rights movement, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the Vietnam War, and poverty. "Art does not come from thinking but from responding," she wrote.

"God's not dead he's bread" was a commissioned poster for the 1968 Poor People's March on Washington. In her 1965 series "Power Up," she appropriated the Richfield Oil gasoline slogan in large colorful letters and paired it with a sermon on hunger and justice by Dan Berrigan.

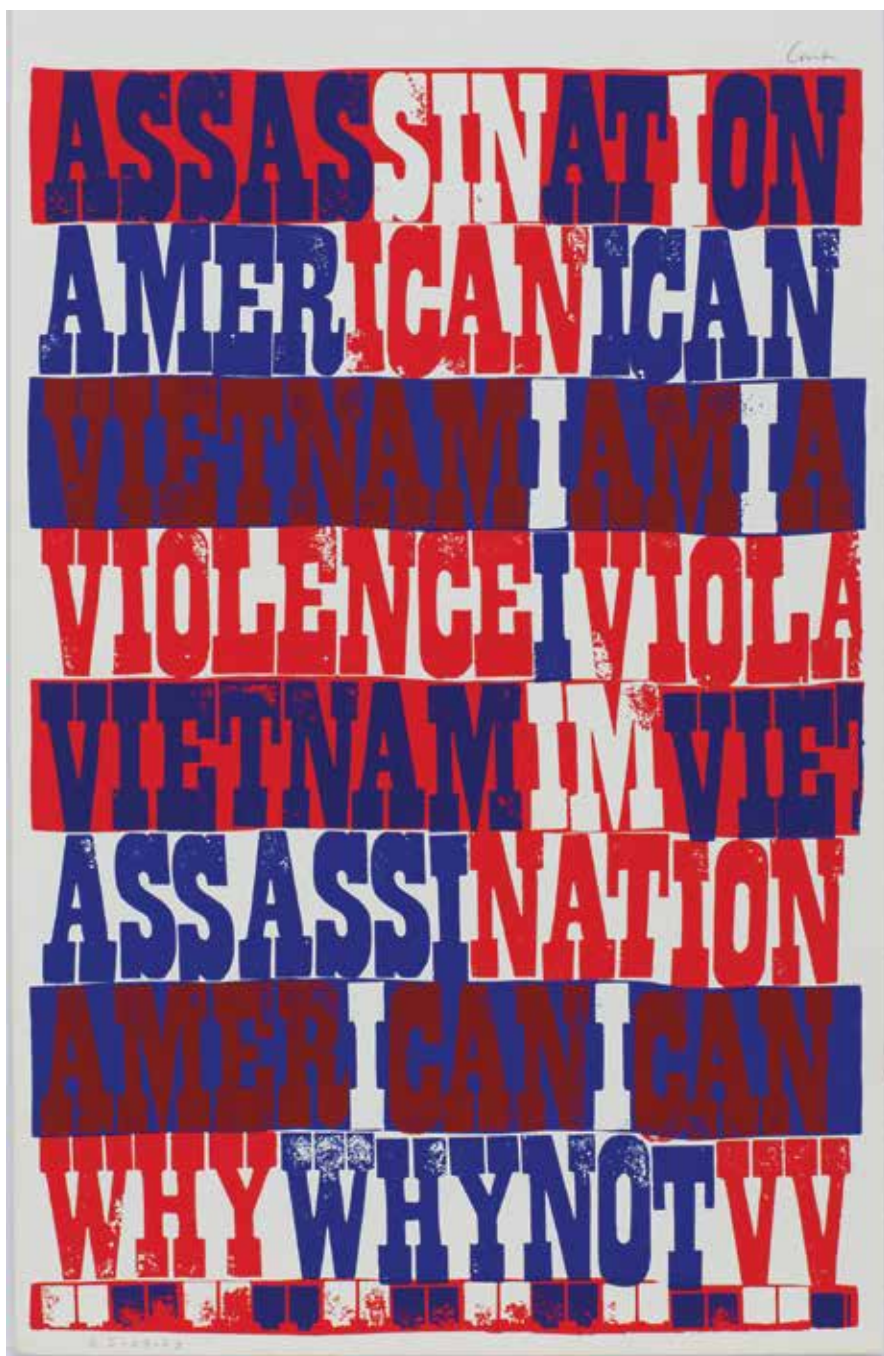
The print "my people" was a response to the Watts Riots in Los Angeles, in which Kent took the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* that said "Eight Men Slain, Guard Moves In" and laid it next to a quote by Father Maurice Ouelett, who took part in the Selma march: "The body of Christ is no more comfortable now than it was when it hung from the cross."

Her many anti-war serigraphs include "american sampler," where the words "american, assassination, vietnam, violence, sin" blend and overlap in red, white, and blue stripes. In "stop the bombing" she used a poem that says, "I am in Vietnam—who will console me?" and "I am terrified of bombs."

Scott's favorite piece includes a quote from peace activist William Sloane Coffin: "Hope arouses, as nothing else can, a passion for the possible!"

"[Kent's] work showed the profound attention she had to the pain and suffering inflicted upon humanity across the world," Swanson says. "She saw the need to bring us hope, to connect to our common humanity. That we couldn't get so depressed or overwhelmed, that we had to keep finding ways to not be burned by the fire."

In times when we "can't sleep at night or lose the meaning of what it's all about," Kent wrote in *Learning by Heart*, simply "doing and making are acts of hope. As that hope grows, we stop feeling overwhelmed by the troubles of the world. We remember that we—as individuals



Detail from american sampler / heroes and sheroes series, serigraph (1968-69)

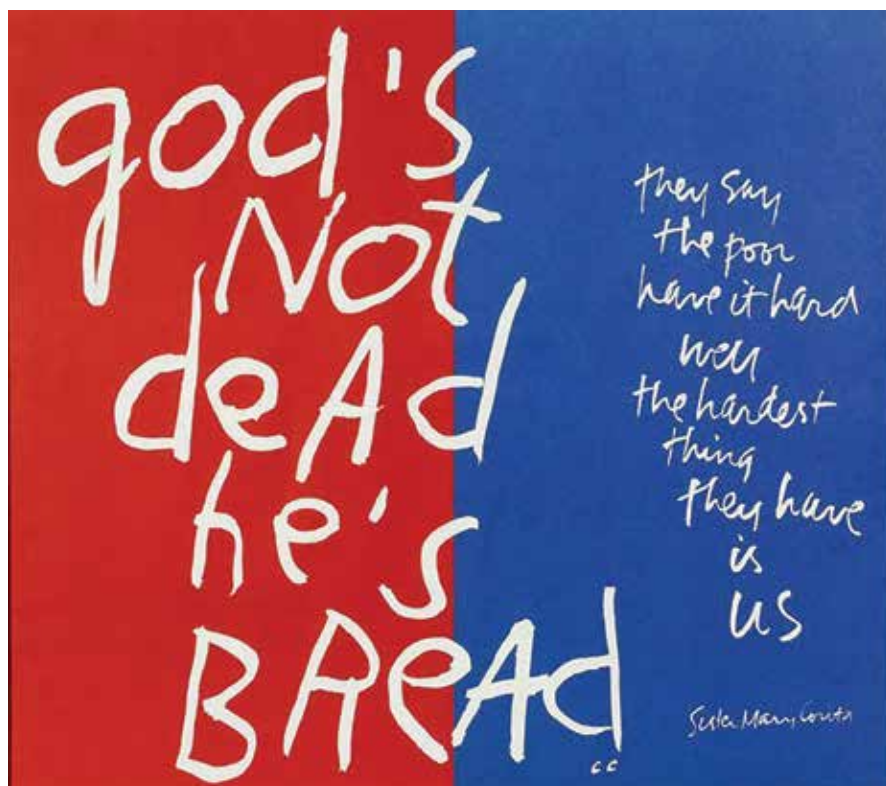
and groups—can do something about those troubles.”

Kent saw creating hope as a collective responsibility, an act of radical neighborly love that won’t let us give up. “Only you and I can help the sun rise each morning,” says one of her serigraphs. “If we don’t, it may drench itself in sorrow.”

Hope is hard work, made in the here-and-now, not found in some far-off ideal. “We knead new bread and we need new bread,” she wrote in *Footnotes and Headlines*—with and for one another.

An ornate, thin-lined alphabet swirls and twists in bright yellow on a pink backdrop in “words of prayer,”

Her art spoke of the miracle of the human story: that we—in a harsh and devastating world—continue to create and relate and help suns rise each morning.



Detail from the Poor People's Campaign for the Washington March on Poverty, poster commission (1968)

one of Swanson’s favorite pieces. Next to the alphabet is a quote in block letters from a Hasidic story: “He repeated the letters of the alphabet over and over beseeching the Almighty to arrange them into the appropriate words of the prayers.”

Kent, attentive to the needs of the world, beseeched God through her art to arrange and transubstantiate the alphabet of the ordinary into communal prayers. Her art spoke of the miracle of the human story: that we—in a harsh and devastating world—continue to create and relate and help suns rise each morning. “The Incarnation is still going on and is still bursting like firecrackers and sending out great shoots of light into all things around us,” Kent said. We just have to pay attention.

IT'S UP TO YOU

Kent’s revolutionary, barrier-breaking life was considered an affront to reactionary traditionalists like Cardinal James McIntyre, the archbishop of Los Angeles from 1948 to 1970, who banned many of Kent’s pieces from being shown publicly. Years of backlash from the archdiocese and the public spotlight began to exhaust Kent, and in 1968 she left her order and moved to Boston to focus on her art and live a quieter life. She spent more time in nature and began painting simple watercolors.

In 1986 Kent died of cancer, having created 800 serigraphs in her lifetime.

“Use it all—even the painful parts, and survive with style: that’s what Kent taught,” wrote Jan Steward, a friend and art student of Kent, in *Learning by Heart*. “She knew we would encounter terrific surprises

along the way, and her job was to make us able to experience and relish them. Living the questions was our job; we were never being artists.”

May we, like Kent, remember our “immense powers to change things,” to be co-creators of a new, just world that is already within reach—in every direction, on every street, in every room, in every heart. Her 1981 serigraph, “it’s up to you,” speaks to this:

“You—special, miraculous, unrepeatable, fragile, fearful, tender, lost, sparkling ruby emerald jewel, rainbow splendor person—It’s up to you.” ❁

Cassidy Klein is an editorial assistant at *Sojourners*.

POWER IN THE BLOOD

A Catholic ministry lives out its charism of
restorative justice in a Chicago neighborhood.



BY SOPHIE VODVARKA
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JERMAINE JACKSON JR.



Once a month, 30 mothers and grandmothers gather at the Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation in Chicago. The women share a meal before coming together in a circle. Facing each other in their chairs, they begin to share stories of painful loss.

Sister Donna Liette, who coordinates the organization's Family Forward Program, created this space 10 years ago for women who have lost children and grandchildren to gun violence or incarceration. Gun violence has been a devastating reality in the city for decades. In 2020 alone, the Cook County Medical Examiner reported 875 gun-related homicides. And while incarceration rates have declined in recent years, Illinois had approximately 38,000 incarcerated individuals in 2020, according to the Henry Frank Guggenheim Foundation.

Liette says she keeps in touch with around 80 women through the program, many of whom attend the monthly gathering. Judy Fields is one of them. Three of her grandchildren have been killed by gun violence in the Back of the Yards neighborhood.

"I first met Sister Donna four years ago, and we became instant friends," Fields said. "I don't have anybody to talk to, and she fills that void. She looks after me—she knows how to listen."

REIMAGINING A CORE CALLING

Just north of Sherman Park, the Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation (PBMR) is housed on the second floor of a former school building. The grounds boast a large community garden and basketball court. There are several colorful "peace poles," each standing as an international symbol of the hope for peace.

Rev. Denny Kinderman, who is frequently accompanied by his small black dog, Francis, was ordained a priest in 1967. He is a member of the Catholic community known as the Missionaries of the Precious Blood. All Catholic religious communities are centered upon a spiritual gift known as a charism, which guides the work of each community's ministry. For the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, that focus has long been reconciliation and restorative justice.

Kinderman, who is white, spent the first 17 years of his priestly ministry in a Black neighborhood in Cincinnati. Coming from an all-white community in Dayton, Ohio, Kinderman said he spent the early years of his ministry walking around, listening to, and learning from the neighborhood. "In the Black community, I learned spirituality," he said.

Then came the 2000s. Kinderman said his religious order's numbers were rapidly diminishing. Priests were dying and retiring, and fewer men were choosing to pursue the

vocation. Around the country, the order could no longer take care of parishes and so returned them to the care of dioceses. Kinderman and Rev. David Kelly, who now serves as PBMR's executive director, were called to participate in the order's special meeting to reimagine its charism.

The two priests considered what a ministry of reconciliation would look like without a parish, due in part to the reality that parish ministry had become incredibly time-consuming. After consulting with local church leaders, they decided to relocate to the Back of the Yards neighborhood. In 2002, Kinderman, who is now the ministry's spiritual adviser and youth counselor, and Kelly moved into a small apartment connected to St. Michael the Archangel parish. "We went around the neighborhood and introduced ourselves," Kelly said. "From the corner store to local pastors to the schools—anyone who would be willing to talk."

As two white outsiders in a largely Latino and Black community, Kelly said that the most important element of founding the reconciliation ministry was to not make assumptions about the needs and assets of the community. After a year of meeting with community members, Kelly and Kinderman founded the nonprofit ministry based on what the community said they needed: help dealing with gun violence, poverty, and a lack of work and educational opportunities.

SHAPED BY THE COMMUNITY

The Back of the Yards neighborhood is named after the Union Stock Yards, once the country's largest stockyard for animals before advancements in transportation and distribution forced it to close in 1971. Originally home to immigrants from Slavic countries, by the 1970s institutionalized racial discrimination—manifested in redlining and white flight—shifted the racial and ethnic makeup of the neighborhood to what it is now, a largely Black and Latino community.

But years of job loss and disinvestment can be seen in the boarded-up buildings throughout the area. Between 2014 and 2018, vacant units made up 20 percent of the housing stock in the New City community area, which includes the Back of the Yards neighborhood, compared to 12.6 percent in Chicago as a whole. Like other U.S. urban hubs, Chicago lost its core of industrialized jobs when the factories shuttered. In the years since, Back of the Yards has suffered from disinvestment in public schools. A report from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency

for Planning revealed that, as of 2018, 28.3 percent of the people in New City had not finished high school.

Community members of the Back of the Yards neighborhood have also been impacted by the nation's prison-industrialization complex, which has monetized incarceration for private prison owners and suppliers across the U.S. "Rarely are we measuring the negative impact of racism, generational poverty, inadequate schools, lack of safe spaces for play," Kelly said. "Nobody is saying, 'What is that doing to the youth and our families?' And these are the forces [people in Back of the Yards] are fighting against."

The first program Kelly and Kinderman developed was a weekly "peace circle" for young men in the neighborhood—sometimes from rival gangs—to meet in a safe space and talk. The priests also worked in the juvenile detention center, forming relationships with the young men and staying in contact with them after their release. One of the first programs offered for boys in the neighborhood was painting lessons, which have since evolved into a community art space, Art on 51st, where anyone can display their creative work.

Throughout the years, the programs have been largely shaped by the needs and ingenuity of community members in collaboration with partner organizations and PBMR staff members. Participants' interest in music led to the creation of a recording studio. Social enterprise programs, including carpentry and screen printing, provide participants with job training and income. A high school diploma program, which is housed on the first floor of the building, was envisioned by a participant who had dropped out of high school and wanted an alternative to a GED program. And the community garden sprouted through listening to the community's need for fresh produce—the neighborhood is among many "food deserts" in Chicago, with most residents living more than a mile from a grocery store.

FACILITATING SACRED SPACE

One of PBMR's central ministries is the facilitation of the peace circles. Indigenous and First Nations communities have a long history of similar conflict resolution practices. Peace circles have been adapted to resolve disputes between community members in a nonhierarchical format, as well as to connect with others in open conversation. Restorative justice practitioner and trainer Pamela Purdie says peace circles are a



"sacred space" that need to be conducted with "integrity."

Cheryl Graves leads the Community Justice for Youth Institute, which brings restorative justice practices to youth and communities throughout Chicago. The initiative has been a partner of PBMR's peace circle program since the beginning. "This [restorative justice] can't be done with professionals, it needs to be done with the people impacted," Graves said, explaining that restorative justice is a community-centric practice and not something, in her view, that can be properly practiced by courts or other institutions.

All PBMR staff members are trained in facilitating the circles, which require a meaningful object as a centerpiece and a "talking piece." Only the person holding the talking piece can speak, creating an environment of deep listening. Participants often bring in personal objects, such as photos of loved ones, to use. The center's carpentry program designs and sells wood talking pieces.

The two organizations also work together on a program called "Just Peace," an initiative focused on the Back of the Yards neighborhood through which community members are trained on "going deep" with the relationship-building that restorative justice requires. The idea is to train community members in restorative justice practices so that the community can solve its own issues.

ON THE OTHER SIDE

Four years ago, 18-year-old Curtis Dixon encountered PBMR while playing basketball

on the courts outside of the office. Since his initial visit, Dixon has become an active participant in many of the programs, including learning how to screen-print T-shirts and make flower boxes. Dixon is also a certified peace circle keeper and lives in housing the ministry provides for people in need of transitional housing. Dixon said the center brings hope to his community, which he described as dangerous due to frequent shootings and gang activity. “We don’t have productive things to do [in the neighborhood],” he said. “The center changed that. And it heals people.”

As a young Black man, Dixon described several instances of being stopped by police and racially profiled, including a recent experience when he was borrowing Kelly’s car. Kelly said the police officer “violated several codes of conduct,” handcuffing Dixon and his friend for no reason. Dixon and his friend were eventually released and not cited or charged.

Policing is a topic of contentious conversation in Back of the Yards. Still, PBMR was able to provide a space for dialogue between police and the community a few

years ago by hosting a peace circle between members of Black Lives Matter and the Chicago Police Department. Police officers have joined peace circles with members of the community numerous times since, and participants have shared personal, vulnerable stories, including those involving police brutality.

Joe Joe Mapp, PBMR’s program manager and director of reentry for returned citizens, grew up on Chicago’s South Side. He learned of the ministry while incarcerated. Staff members wrote him letters and cultivated a relationship with him, he said. Now on the other side, Mapp spends his days accompanying men through a trauma-informed process as they navigate both the prison system and the difficult stages of reentering society.

Reentering society is not only “disorienting,” Mapp said, but filled with bureaucratic red tape for necessities such as identification cards. Returned citizens also face stigmatization during job searches and often have difficulty obtaining housing. The Metropolitan Planning Council and the Illinois Justice Project reported in 2019

that nearly 40 percent of people who have been incarcerated return to prison within three years.

In the last year alone, Mapp has accompanied at least 72 people. His work includes writing letters to men in prison, picking them up once they are released, helping them prepare for jobs, and assisting with buying clothes, bus passes, and other things they need. “We let people play the lead role in designing their success,” Mapp said. “Once you start to feel more valuable yourself, you start to value others. You start to invest in your community, you want to clean it up.” Mapp added that he and his colleagues work in partnership with a variety of community organizations such as Chicago Votes, which advocates for voting rights and provides voter registration forms to formerly incarcerated people once they are released. “We try to engage the systems that speak for, and speak with, those people who may not be heard in these spaces,” Mapp said.

Having Mapp’s expertise and presence is essential to PBMR’s ministry, Kelly said. Mapp plans to buy a home in Back of the Yards. “I think this community is full of potential,” Mapp said. “I think, given the opportunity, this community can thrive.”

‘ONCE YOU START TO FEEL MORE VALUABLE YOURSELF, YOU START TO INVEST IN YOUR COMMUNITY.’ — JOE JOE MAPP, ABOVE LEFT

NO MATTER WHAT

Sister Liette’s office is located on the first floor of the building where Kelly and Kinderman live, just across the street from the ministry’s main building. The outer room of her office boasts a brightly colored mural designed by members of the Back of the Yards community.

Pointing to a butterfly painted on the mural, Liette told the story of Branden, a young man involved in the ministry. Branden was murdered in the neighborhood a few days after helping to paint the butterfly.

The reality of suffering and death, Liette said, ties back to the charisma of her religious community of women, the Sisters of the Precious Blood. She said there will always be an opportunity for restorative justice through the blood of Jesus.

“There’s a power in the blood—there is a call to the preciousness of every human being,” Liette said. “Jesus shed his blood for all people. No matter what, you’re precious.” ✱

Sophie Vodvarka (@SophieVodvarka) is a writer in Chicago and contributor to *National Catholic Reporter*.



Participants in a “peace circle” in Chicago’s Back of the Yards neighborhood

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olved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political cer
ndent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract
And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance

John Hooper
Joseph Hewes,
John Penn

John H.

Samuel Chase
Wm. Paca
Tho: Stone
Chas: Carroll

Edward Rutledge

Thos: Mifflin
Thomas Lynch

George

According to Thomas Jefferson, the U.S. government is for all its citizens,
regardless of religion. Our politics tells another story.

AMERICA'S NARROW GATE

By Da'Shawn Mosley
Illustrations by Mike McQuade



EXCEPT FOR ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THOMAS JEFFERSON, EVERY PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES WAS OR IS A PROFESSING CHRISTIAN.

Only in the case of John F. Kennedy, it seems, has a president's Christian faith counted against him in the opinion of a significant number of citizens, and in Kennedy's case it was because he was Catholic rather than Protestant. The Christian belief of public officials in any branch of national, state, or local government hardly ever raises concern among the U.S. public. But the opposite is true when it comes to Muslim officials.

Many conservative Americans say they fear that the U.S. will become a nation influenced by Islamic tenets instead of Christian ones. Commentators on Fox News often express alarm about sharia (Islamic law). Jeanine Pirro, host of the network's *Justice with Jeanine Pirro*, accused Rep. Ilhan Omar, D-Minn., a Muslim woman of Somali descent, of supporting Islamic rule in the United States. Omar

and Rep. Rashida Tlaib of Michigan are the only two Muslim women ever elected to Congress, and two of the three Muslims ever to serve in the U.S. legislature; Twitter users criticized Omar for wearing a hijab and Tlaib for wearing, at her congressional swearing-in, a traditional Palestinian dress called a thobe, made by her mother. Another Fox News host, Pete Hegseth, said that, based on how Tlaib "talked about President Trump having a hate agenda, I could, therefore, look at her and say that she has a Hamas agenda." The Associated Press had to debunk the claim that Tlaib's thobe was a "symbol of Hamas terrorists," a sign that many Americans may have believed it to be true.

The alienation and hate go even further. A Florida Republican politician said in a fundraising email that falsely claimed that Omar worked for the nation of Qatar,

"We should hang these traitors where they stand." Another man called Omar's office and said he would "put a bullet in her skull." Following the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, when lawmakers were still in the building trying to certify President Joe Biden's election, Tlaib discussed on the House floor her constant fear due to the death threats she regularly receives.

"I worry," she said, "every day."

THE DEMONIZATION OF ISLAM

Jefferson, third president and key author of the Declaration of Independence, wrote in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom that "proscribing any citizen as unworthy the public confidence by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to offices of trust and emolument, unless he profess

or renounce this or that religious opinion, is depriving him injuriously of those privileges and advantages to which, in common with his fellow citizens, he has a natural right.” (At the time, women were barred from public office.)

As Tlaib’s swearing-in to Congress neared, she planned to place her left hand on Jefferson’s 1734 edition of the Quran, just as Keith Ellison, the first Muslim to be elected to Congress and now attorney general of Minnesota, had done years before. “It’s important to me,” Tlaib said, “because a lot of Americans have this kind of feeling that Islam is somehow foreign to American history. Some of our Founding Fathers knew more about Islam than some members of Congress now.”

But the day before her ceremony, a *Washington Post* investigation into the history of Jefferson’s Quran revealed that George Sale, the British scholar who translated the book, did the translation so that Protestant Christian missionaries traveling to Muslim nations would be able, in Sale’s words, to “attack the Korân with success”—in other words, to convert Muslims to Christianity, to eliminate their Islamic belief.

Tlaib decided to forego swearing in on Jefferson’s Quran and placed her left hand on her own copy of the holy text instead.

In the West, “we somehow think about Islam as different from all other religions,” said Sylvia Chan-Malik, a scholar of the history of Islam in the United States and an associate professor in the American and Women’s and Gender Studies departments at Rutgers University. “Jewish Americans, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus: We do not think of them as somehow in lockstep, being fueled somehow, magically or very viscerally, through their holy texts,” Chan-Malik told *Sojourners*. “Whereas Muslims are seen in that way, and that is, in my estimation, a configuration of all of these factors around race, around religion, around certain notions of gendered Muslim bodies.” In North America, according to Chan-Malik, Islam and race are connected because “anywhere from one-tenth to one-third of enslaved Africans in this country were Muslim.”

Alaina Morgan, also a scholar of the history of Islam and an assistant professor of history at the University of Southern California, told *Sojourners* that bias against Muslims goes even further back in history. “The demonization of Islam and the othering of Islam, the orientalizing of it, really goes back to the medieval period,” Morgan said. If you “look at illuminated texts and



stained glass and psalters, songbooks, you’ll see things like a crusading army invading, and the people that they are fighting, Muslims, looking just grotesque, extremely dark-skinned in comparison to [the crusading army] looking light and angelic.”

FAITH IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

This demonization and racializing of Islam echoes to the present, with Islamophobic vitriol often aimed at African Americans, immigrants, and other people of color. Some white Americans, for instance, still claim that Barack Obama, the nation’s first African American president, couldn’t

possibly be Christian, insisting that he’s Muslim. In 2018, now-Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Republican from Georgia, also proclaimed that Obama was “secretly” Muslim, and in 2020 she posted on the Facebook page for her congressional campaign a picture of herself holding a gun beside Omar, Tlaib, and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York (who’s Catholic), with the caption: “We need strong conservative Christians to go on the offense against these socialists who want to rip our country apart.” Greene is still a member of Congress.

Questions of how religious people should bring their faith into the public sphere were on Obama’s mind when he



“Jewish Americans, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus: We do not think of them as being fueled somehow, magically or very viscerally, through their holy texts. Whereas Muslims are seen in that way.”



was a U.S. senator. In 2006, two years before his historic election to the presidency, he spoke about these issues at a conference co-hosted by Sojourners. "[S]ecularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering the public square," Obama said. He cited the faith-based moral language of Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, William Jennings Bryan, Dorothy Day, and Martin Luther King Jr.,

all of whom played a part in the ongoing push for equal rights for all members of the citizenry.

And yet, said Obama, "Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. ... Now this is going to be difficult for some who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, as many evangelicals do. But in a pluralistic democracy, we have no choice. Politics depends on our ability to persuade each other of common aims based on a common reality. It involves the compromise, the art of what's possible. At some fundamental level, religion does not allow for compromise. It's the art of the impossible."

But Rachel Laser, CEO of Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the organization's first female and first Jewish leader, believes compromise is attainable. "We don't want to ask anybody to strip themselves of who they are when they serve in office," Laser told *Sojourners*. "But at the same time, you want to make sure that when people become political leaders in America, they understand that they're representing all people's interests, not just the interests of some. ... Our laws protect everybody's right equally to believe or not as they see fit, as long as they don't harm others." Americans United, according to Laser, doesn't just work to win legal battles but also seeks to educate the American citizenry that the separation of church and state "strengthens religion."

Education, Morgan believes, could also establish collective knowledge of Islam in the U.S., undoing misinformation people have about Muslims. That would likely bring the nation closer to the religious tolerance Jefferson envisioned.

RESPECTING PEOPLE OF ALL RELIGIONS

"For many Americans," said Morgan, "when they think about Islam, they think about Malcolm X, and then they think about 9/11 ... and it really has to do with the lack of great education on the subject, and the Christian bias, quite frankly, in education."

It's not commonly taught in U.S. public schools that, to quote the historian Sam Haselby, "Muslims were living in America not only before Protestants, but before Protestantism existed. Af-

ter Catholicism, Islam was the second monotheistic religion in the Americas." That makes the presence of Muslims in the U.S. government, and the election of Muslims to public offices, long overdue.

"In terms of political enfranchisement and participation," said Chan-Malik, "I do see that there's been an incredible push in young Muslim communities that are very much being politicized and coming of age within the Black Lives Matter generation. They are starting to see these types of narratives and histories becoming more accessible. There are websites, there are places to access. Whether they're from Pakistan or Bangladesh or Indonesia or Egypt, they're starting to see that Islam does have a particular narrative in the United States that is rooted in Black liberation struggles, that's rooted in anti-colonialism, that has this particular power to it." Emgage, a nonprofit that seeks to boost the political knowledge and abilities of Muslims in the U.S., estimated that 100 Muslim Americans filed to run for public office in 2018.

Republican Ben Carson, during his 2016 presidential campaign, said, "I would not advocate that we put a Muslim in charge of this nation." In response, Yusuf Dafur, then 12 years old, said in a video he asked his mom to post on Facebook: "Obama already broke that Black people boundary," the bias keeping African American people from sitting behind the Resolute desk, "and I will break that Muslim boundary. I will become the first Muslim president, and you will see that when I become president, I will respect people of all faiths, all colors, and all religions."

When Obama was elected president in 2008, the nation that had emerged from the Declaration penned by Thomas Jefferson did not shatter. Obama's blackness did not mar the role he assumed, and neither will anyone's Muslim identity.

How long will it take for America to understand this? Will it take until 2038, when Dafur will turn 35, the minimum age for a U.S. citizen to run for the country's highest office? How long will it take for the virtues of equity and openness touted in our founding documents to take precedence in our modern politics?

Perhaps, to paraphrase Dafur, "We will see." *

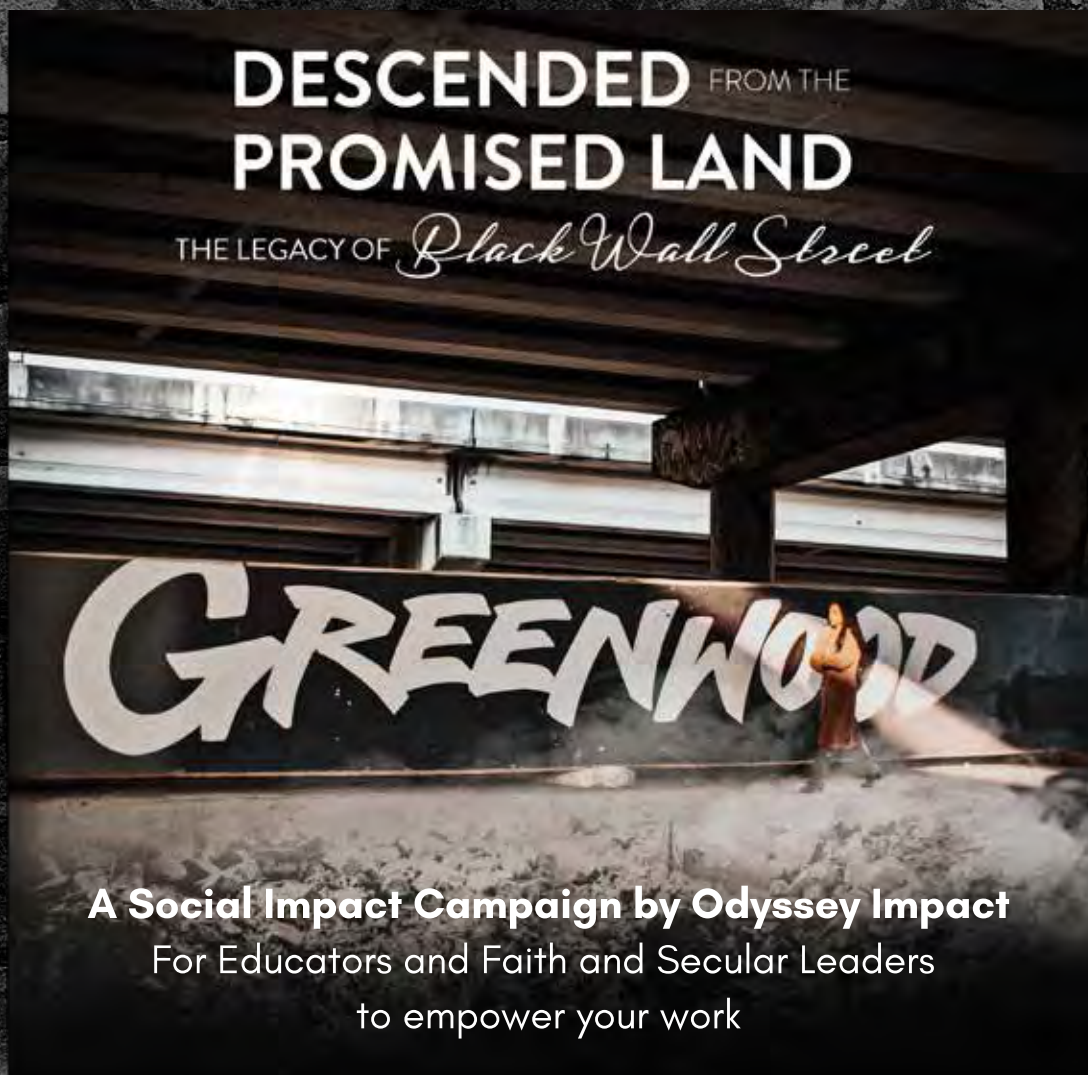
Da'Shawn Mosley is associate editor of *Sojourners* magazine.

IT'S TIME TO EDUCATE AND VALIDATE THE TRUTH IN OUR HISTORY

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MARY LOU WILLIAMS' JAZZ IS FOR THE MASSES. DEANNA WITKOWSKI IS SPREADING THE WORD.



From the 1920s until her death in 1981, Black jazz pianist and composer Mary Lou Williams injected energy and innovation into the genre and, via three jazz Masses composed after her conversion to Catholicism in the 1950s, into the church. Still, her music is sometimes overlooked, while the popularity of male jazz musicians' work—including her mentees Thelonious Monk and Charlie Parker—persists.

In this century, Deanna Witkowski is amplifying Williams' works of music and faith. Witkowski is a jazz pianist herself, inspired by Williams, and a doctoral student in the jazz studies program at the University of Pittsburgh. She is restoring and recording general and liturgical compositions by Williams, some of which haven't been recorded since 1944. And she has written a biography of the pioneer, *Mary Lou Williams: Music for the Soul* (Liturgical Press). Witkowski spoke with *Sojourners* associate editor Da'Shawn Mosley about the book and its namesake.

Music

Da'Shawn Mosley: How did you become interested enough in Mary Lou Williams to write a biography of her?

Deanna Witkowski: In 2000, Dr. Billy Taylor, a jazz musician himself and the judge from a jazz piano competition I had played the year before, contacted me and said, "Come bring your quintet to play at the Mary Lou Williams Women in Jazz Festival at the Kennedy Center in the spring." And so of course I said, "Yes, I would love to do this." And then thought, "I really don't know Mary Lou Williams' music."



That's a very common thing, even among jazz musicians or aficionados. She has this reputation [as] this great pianist and composer who wrote big-band music for Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman and mentored all these famous jazz musicians—so we know Thelonious Monk. But her compositions aren't very well known.

So, I contacted a trumpet player named Dave Douglas. He'd just done a tribute record for Mary Lou. I emailed him and said, "Could you tell me some records to check out?" There was a new biography of her then called *Morning Glory*, by Linda Dahl, so I read that and learned how [Williams] converted to Catholicism and wrote all this liturgical music. That really hooked me because I had just written my first jazz Mass for a church where I was a music director. So, I felt like, "Oh, OK, there's someone else who has done this; she's this badass player and super swingy and plays all these different styles of jazz," and I kept getting more deeply into her music.

What techniques or innovations set Williams apart from her peers? She would play huge, full, two-handed chords very densely and a lot of crunchy, tense, dense chord voicings that don't sound like anybody else. They kind of relate to the harmony but not exactly. And she prided herself on having a very strong left hand, meaning when she's comping for a soloist or for herself, her groove, you really feel it in her left hand.

Performing jazz often seems spontaneous. Was writing this biography a contrast to that? There's sometimes a misconception—or rather a mystery—about jazz: "What's improvisation? What do you do?" Last week I played a jam session and this lady asked me, "Well, how do you all know what to play at the same time? What happens? It just comes out of the air?" No, we're agreeing on a set of parameters that may be the structure of a song, or just a rhythmic groove, or one note. And then there's all the work and discipline of figuring out what notes and what rhythms sound good and how do I put them all together so that, eventually, I don't have to think about that stuff.

I am definitely not at that point in my writing. I thought

about every sentence in this book. One thing that really helped me was that a few of us from a writing workshop at the Collegeville Institute a couple summers ago [would get] together at 6 a.m. on Facebook just to check in, then an hour later we would check out and say, "This is what I did," even if it was just two sentences. So that really helped me, just having a little bit of accountability.

Did you learn anything about Williams while researching this book that surprised you?

I knew about this a little, but I spent more time with it: In Mary Lou's archives at Rutgers University's Newark Institute for Jazz Studies, there's this huge section that's just correspondences. I had read in earlier biographies letters that she wrote to a Franciscan brother, Brother Mario Hancock, who was a very close friend of hers in the '60s. But what I hadn't seen were all these letters that she had to nuns, and that really touched me. There was one in particular that I talk about in the book, with a Cenacle Sister named Martha Mulligan. I pieced together that Mary Lou went on spiritual retreats whenever she could. I couldn't always pinpoint exact dates, but whenever she was touring, she would try to go on retreat for a few days. And it seems like every time she did that, she would make friends with another nun and then start writing them. It was so apparent—because I'm reading letters back from Sister Mulligan—that Sister Mulligan was relying on Mary Lou for comfort, sustenance, for friendship, just as much as Mary Lou was relying on her.

There are other letters I found from when Mary Lou had a thrift shop in Chelsea, in New York City, and she found a nearby Catholic convent. There were letters from nuns there asking when she was going to visit again.

I knew Mary Lou had at some points—maybe not super specifically—talked about possibly wanting to be a dedicated woman religious. I think that her friendships with these women helped her to realize that she was doing a religious vocation, a religious calling, whether it was sacred music or not. In the other biographies and stories, we always hear about these priests or men

cont'd on page 45

**HER FRIENDSHIPS
WITH THESE WOMEN
HELPED HER TO
REALIZE THAT SHE
WAS DOING A
RELIGIOUS VOCATION,
WHETHER IT WAS
SACRED MUSIC
OR NOT.**

CITY OF BROTHERLY JUSTICE?

By Da'Shawn Mosley

P

Pennsylvania captured the attention of many of us this year via the superb crime drama *Mare of Easttown* on HBO, but there's another incredible television show set in the state that we should be watching. I'm talking about *Philly D.A.*, on PBS. An eight-episode documentary series focused on activist-at-

torney Larry Krasner's unusual election to the role of Philadelphia's district attorney and his desire to drastically reform the office, *Philly D.A.* is gripping and revelatory in how it explores the intricacies of his efforts. In the social justice sphere, we have big ideas of how government systems and traditions can be altered and abandoned, but most of us never get the chance to implement them. *Philly D.A.* depicts a staff doing just that and shows how difficult it is.

We see assistant DAs and staff members who have worked in the office for years, for several administrations, and have households and families—we see them be fired because they're believed to be too entrenched in how things were done in the past. We see surviving loved ones of murdered citizens wonder why, after many years of the DA's office recommending the death penalty, Krasner does not see it as a good solution. We see judges and other officials express their fear that, in the pursuit of innovation, all aspects of a functioning system are being tampered with, negatively affecting the city's safety.

It's complex. It's painful. And somehow these filmmakers capture it all, even getting access to a city judge who's critical of Krasner, watching as the judge receives

a terse letter from the D.A. himself.

Philly D.A. is like an earlier HBO drama, *The Wire*, in how thoroughly it depicts the way a city operates, but—not to be ludicrous—it's also like the Batman movie *The Dark Knight*. Several shots of *Philly D.A.* look as though someone dimmed the sun, streetlights, or ceiling lights, creating a darkness reminiscent of the DC Comics film's cinematography. Not to mention the thunderous music that makes you half expect the Caped Crusader to jump into the frame with his own radical approach of justice. It brings to mind *The Dark Knight's* focus on another district attorney's grand hopes for change, with the city's police wondering whether to call him Harvey Dent or Two-Face.

But, as fascinating as *Philly D.A.* is, the stakes are much higher than entertainment. Right before a divisive press conference, a member of the new DA administration—a mother whose child was murdered and who, after that loss, received inadequate help from the office she now works in—muses on their efforts: "Some of this stuff just becomes a circus. But it's people's lives." ♦

Da'Shawn Mosley is associate editor of *Sojourners*.

From *Philly D.A.*

RUBY'S REFRAIN

Siân Heder's heartwarming feature film *Coda* captures the love and struggles of a deaf household and their family business. As a CODA (child of deaf adults) and the only hearing person in her family of four, 17-year-old Ruby faces a dilemma when she discovers her talent for singing.

Pathé



Sally's Story

In *Affirming: A Memoir of Faith, Sexuality, and Staying in the Church*, Sally Gary shares her journey through isolation and profound community as she opens fruitful conversations on sexuality and following Christ.

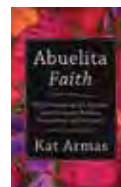
Eerdmans



Grandmother Gospel

Kat Armas uplifts the theological formation she has received from grandmothers in *Abuelita Faith: What Women on the Margins Teach Us About Wisdom, Persistence, and Strength*. Her storytelling and biblical exploration prompt us to honor the matriarchs in our lives.

Brazos Press



BILLY GRAHAM: TRAGIC HERO?

By Danny
Duncan Collum



Eyes & Ears

The two-hour PBS documentary *Billy Graham* ran as part of the “American Experience” series, but it could have been subtitled “An American Tragedy.”

The story *Billy Graham* tells is mostly one of triumph. A boy grows up on a North Carolina dairy farm, becomes the top Fuller Brush salesman in a two-state territory, then answers a call to preach. His crusades attract more than 200 million people and change hundreds of thousands of lives. However, like all the tragic heroes before him, Billy Graham had a flaw. It was neither lust nor greed, the nemeses of so many evangelists. Instead, as one of the commentators in the documentary tells us, Graham was drawn to power “like a moth to a flame.”

In the 1940s Graham led a movement that dragged evangelical Christianity out of the cultural backwoods and into the mainstream of postwar American life. Graham’s early years provide a road map of that movement as he went from ultra-sectarian Bob Jones University to Florida Bible Institute to Wheaton College. He worked as a staff preacher with Youth for Christ, then began a series of independent evangelistic crusades that started in a tent off Hollywood Boulevard in 1949 and culminated, in 1957, with a 16-week run at Madison Square Garden.

In 1950, convinced that a public relationship with the U.S. president would let him reach even broader audiences, Graham inveigled his way into an Oval Office meeting with a skeptical President Harry Truman, who reluctantly allowed

“THERE HAVE BEEN TIMES IN THE PAST WHEN I HAVE, I SUPPOSE, CONFUSED THE KINGDOM OF GOD WITH THE AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE.”

Graham to pray over him. Undeterred by Truman’s later feelings that he was a showman and “one of those counterfeits,” in 1952 Graham became an off-the-record campaign adviser to Republicans, a role he would reprise for Richard Nixon in 1960 and 1968.

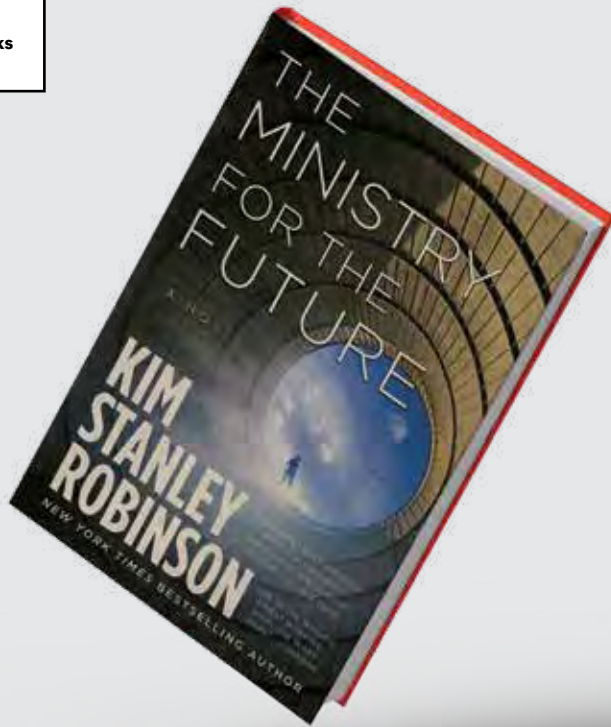
And that’s where the shadows creep in. Graham believed that in Nixon he had found a kindred spirit, a fellow believer even, who would set a new spiritual tone for the nation. He persisted in that belief almost to the bitter end, when the first White House tapes revealed his buddy to be profane, power-mad, fundamentally dishonest, and probably guilty of several felonies.

At this point, to his credit, Graham did not double down on his loyalty to Nixon. Instead, he retreated from overt politics and began a long, penitent third act. In the years that followed, he took his crusades around the world, even behind the Cold War Iron Curtain, and his exposure to a bigger world broadened his faith and his ministry.

In 1979, Graham gave an interview to this magazine in which the man who supported Nixon’s Vietnam policies said, “I believe that the Christian especially has a responsibility to work for peace in our world,” and admitted, “There have been times in the past when I have, I suppose, confused the kingdom of God with the American way of life.”

The documentary ends with Graham, white-haired and weakened in 2005, doing what he always did best—giving an altar call, in New York’s Flushing Meadows Corona Park, while thousands of every class and color streamed forward to let Jesus change their lives. ✕

Danny Duncan Collum teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort. He is the author of the novel *White Boy*.



THE “FICTION” OF THIS NOVEL READS MORE PROPHETIC THAN FUTURISTIC.

hope of *Ministry* is found in the unwavering humanity of its many heroes.

Like any good prophet, Robinson can help us understand how we might bear the weight of the world’s destruction while lifting our eyes toward the hope of restoration. Both the story and form of *Ministry* point toward a polyphonic approach to climate solutions. Rather than write from a single perspective, Robinson weaves together different narrators and narratives about our climate-changed future. The result is a story about crisis and resilience that does not rely on a *deus ex machina* to save the planet. Rather, victories are interspersed with losses, and occur from the local to the global scale. It is a story that lifts us out of the political dreams of a single technocratic panacea and into improvisational responses to the exigencies of climate change.

In the midst of heat-waves and floods, geopolitics and governance, *Ministry* shines forth with humanness. This is perhaps the most compelling part of *The Ministry for the Future*: Hope is found in the human moments. In the midst of an existential crisis of planetary scale, it can seem prudent to strip ourselves of that which makes us human: the grief of death, the pain of separation, the excitement of love. Compared to the scale of the problem,

our individual losses and victories can seem paltry. Robinson inverts this line of thinking, handing the pen to those who, in the midst of all that climate change is taking away, are fighting to hold on to that which they love the most.

It is precisely this approach that makes the heroes of *Ministry*—and there are many—able to persevere, despite the profound depth of the crisis. Just like in our world, the climate heroes of *Ministry* are not the politicians and celebrities who act with pomp and hubris. They are the refugees and farmers and bureaucrats who everyday find their own way to be more human. Who trust that, by the grace of God, their small part might be redeemed into something greater. ✱

Avery Davis Lamb

(@averydavislamb) is studying the intersection of Christianity and the environment at Duke Divinity School and the Nicholas School of the Environment.

The Ministry for the Future,
by Kim Stanley Robinson

Orbit

HEARTS AND HEATWAVES

It begins in the way the 2020s could end: with a climate change-driven heat wave that kills 20 million people in India. Kim Stanley Robinson’s work of science fiction is heavy on the science and light on the fiction. Indeed, the “fiction” of this novel reads more prophetic than futuristic. Just like biblical prophets, Robinson is less interested in predicting a far-off world than seeing our current world for what it is. The words of the prophet Jeremiah would fit snugly in this book: “Disaster overtakes disaster, the whole land is laid waste” (4:20).

Robinson’s vision of a response to climate change veers on the edge of technological utopianism without ever falling into the abyss. The airships, cryptocurrencies, and drones of Robinson’s novel are not simply fantastic simulations of a utopian (or dystopian) world. They are pragmatic responses to a world that is burning and melting under our feet. While the need for technological solutions is so apparent in *Ministry* (and in our own world), Robinson’s hope is not located in technology. Rather, the tentative

'NEWSROOMS HAD TO ADAPT'

The God Beat: What Journalism
Says about Faith and Why It Matters,
edited by Costica Bradatan
and Ed Simon

Broadleaf Books



E

Ed Simon is co-editor of the anthology *The God Beat: What Journalism Says about Faith and Why It Matters*, which explores the New Religion Journalism movement—an offshoot of the New Journalism genre of the 1960s and '70s that fused news writing with the storytelling techniques of novelists, memoirists, and poets. He

discussed his book with Audrey Clare Farley, author of *The Unfit Heiress: The Tragic Life and Scandalous Sterilization of Ann Cooper Hewitt*.

Audrey Clare Farley: You claim New Religion Journalism emerged after 9/11, when it became evident that journalism had “a secularism problem.” Can you explain?

Ed Simon: For a long time a variation of the “secularization thesis” endured in an almost unspoken way. This assumption held that religion was a vestige of an archaic past, and that the future entailed its disappearance. But two decades later we know that religion isn’t going anywhere, and newsrooms had to adapt.

Does the secularism problem persist? Many say the media was blindsided by the rise of Christian nationalism. I think that it has a Christianity problem. By that I don’t mean anything as reductive as saying that journalists are belligerent to Christianity, but the opposite. When many hear the word “religion” they think Christianity, Protestantism, or even evangelical Protestantism. There needs to be a wider scope on what religion means.

New Religion Journalism questions the theism/atheism binary, exploring the “borderlands between faith and doubt” that many occupy and that polling can’t capture. Does this explain the genre’s enduring relevance? Yes, absolutely. Too often there’s this dichotomy between

faith and doubt. The vast majority of us are sometimes believers and sometimes not. The New Religion Journalism, especially when it turns its focus inward, examines the full complexity of belief, where sometimes we’re certain of faith and sometimes we’ve no idea what faith even is.

You write, “Theological speculation is for naught if at its core it doesn’t engender love of our neighbor.” Are these essays as much acts of love as they are acts of critical inquiry? As with the original New Journalists of almost two generations ago, the writers who were so generous to work with us are passionately connected to their subjects. Few things seem less objective than love, but I think if the original New Journalists taught us anything it’s that the reporter is always part of the story, so with honesty they included their own minds—and our reporters included their own hearts.

Would someone like David Foster Wallace be considered a New Religion Journalist? Wallace was concerned with the ambiguities of faith, but also the ways in which faith works. His writing about addiction explores something that’s deeply spiritual, though perhaps not “religion” conventionally understood. Writing about programs like the Twelve Steps is congruent with New Religion Journalism as we’ve defined it, because it’s so at home with the complexity of belief. ✱



cont'd from page 40 who were her spiritual advisers, and they were, but there were these women too. I feel like that's a story that doesn't get told so much. I just got a research grant from the University of Notre Dame to focus on Mary Lou's letters with women religious for a 20-year period. So, I have to get back to Rutgers, once they're having in-person researchers again, and mine those boxes more and flesh out those relationships.

Amazing! The work continues. In January, I recorded with my regular trio and a trumpet player, and then a trio with Pittsburgh musicians, all Mary Lou compositions. Some of the pieces have not been recorded since 1944. And I'm creating a new performance edition of her third Mass for the Mary Lou Williams Foundation.

One track I thought I was going to include on the record but decided not to is an arrangement of hers from the early '40s of the George Gershwin tune "Lady Be Good." The melody she does on that is the same melody on a tune [recorded in 1954] by Thelonious Monk called "Hackensack." And if you ask any jazz musician, if they hear the melody, what it is, they're gonna say, "Hackensack." Well, it's Mary Lou's arrangement from years before Monk recorded it. Monk and Mary Lou were very good friends, so it's not like he stole it or whatever. But there are elements of her music—bridges and tunes—that are like, "This sounds like Monk." It should be, "No, this sounds like Mary Lou," because she's the originator. This happens all the time. I just had a percussionist I saw on Saturday tell me, "Yeah, before I met you, before you came to Pittsburgh, I didn't listen to Mary Lou much. And now, when I listen to Monk, I hear the stuff that's coming from Mary Lou." ❖

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Poetry

AUGUST FIRE—1965

By Katherine H. Maynard



Who is scorched worse,
the one who dives to take the bullet,
the one who shoots,
or the woman spared?

Take Ruby Sales, for example—
how she and Jonathan Daniels,
thirsty from heat and the Hayneville jail
stop for a cold soda on their way out of town.

Deputy Tom Coleman is angry, is ready;
he aims his gun pointblank at Ruby.
Daniels sees it coming, pushes Ruby over
throws his body in bullet's path.

The 26-year-old priest dies instantly.
But 17-year-old Sales?
She barely speaks for months.
What words can convey such a moment?

The air charred by gun blast,
her limbs tumbling violently,
his body hurtling past, memory blurs
bloodies, incinerating life too fast.

No one can speak for Daniels, Ruby or even Tom
and know what burning coals each held that August day.
Only—how does one live beneath such burdens:
the smoldering scars of hate,
the sear of *no greater love*?

Katherine H. Maynard teaches humanities and communication courses at the Community College of Vermont. Sales, founder of the SpiritHouse Project, is a nationally recognized human rights activist and public theologian. Coleman was acquitted of the death of Jonathan Daniels by an all-white jury and died in 1997.

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SOJOURNERS

WHEN WISDOM THROWS A HOUSE PARTY

Scripture passages are
from the Revised Common
Lectionary, Cycle B

By Isaac S. Villegas



Living the Word

We long for new beginnings, a restart, to go back in time to correct our mistakes or dodge the harm someone has done to us. But those former lives are inaccessible to us. All we have is this life

now. Here we are in the middle: after the beginning and before the end. Usually we associate “middles” with “stuckness”—not the excitement of the new and not the relief of an end but locked in between. For example, the morass that prompts a midlife crisis, that languorous experience of the middle of life that leads to the purchase of a motorcycle.

In the church calendar, we’re in the season called “ordinary time,” a long stretch of weeks between Pentecost and Advent. These are the middle months where the scriptures plop us into the middle of stories. And that is where we find Jesus. The incarnation is an act of God in the middle of Israel’s story: not the beginning, not the conclusion, but God-with-us in the middle. This season of unceasing tedium has also been taken up into the life of God. Perhaps we could describe the incarnation as the midlife crisis of God?

Jesus is the one who has been with us from before the beginning, who has witnessed the groaning of all creation, the births and deaths and the life in between—and comes to us now, where we are, in our midlife, with our regrets and unfulfilled dreams, and guides us as we wander into the ordinary goodness of life.

Isaac S. Villegas is pastor of Chapel Hill (N.C.) Mennonite Fellowship and president of the governing board of the North Carolina Council of Churches.

WE SHARE OUR COMMUNION **MEALS AT THE TABLES** **WISDOM BUILT.**

AUGUST 1

AFTER LIBERATION

EXODUS 16:2-4, 9-15; PSALM 78:23-29;
EPHESIANS 4:1-16; JOHN 6:24-35

After God liberates the Israelites from slavery, after they cross through the Red Sea, after they rejoice in the power of God’s salvation, the people find themselves in the wilderness, an unfamiliar land. Gone are the landmarks they used to orient themselves. Gone are Pharaoh’s rules that governed their social world. Now, as the people wander, God will reveal new ways to structure their lives together.

The first revelation happens the morning after their liberation, when they wake up hungry. “There on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground” (Exodus 16:14). God provides food without labor—without harvesting or hunting. The food is a gift, nothing they’ve earned. With God, they will live by grace alone.

The people don’t recognize the bread as food. The flaky substance on the ground is like nothing they could have anticipated. They call it *manna*, which is just a Hebrew word that means, “What is it?” (Exodus 16:31). Without a name for this food, they call it a word that is a question.

We are in the wilderness with the Israelites. Life on this side of the Red Sea involves a posture of wonder—to watch for miracles, mysteries we’ve ignored because we were expecting something or someone else. Grace happens, even when we have not yet recognized what God has provided.

AUGUST 8

TEARS AS SACRAMENT

2 SAMUEL 18:5-15, 31-33; PSALM 34:1-8;
EPHESIANS 4:25-5:2; JOHN 6:35, 41-51

"O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom!" (2 Samuel 18:33). Despair overwhelms David. His own soldiers disobeyed orders and killed his son, Absalom. Tears come like a flood and wash away David's pretense of control—over himself and his kingdom. What kind of sovereign can't protect his own son? This death exposes his weakness.

Until this point, David's life has been a rags-to-riches story, from a lowly shepherd to the throne room of Israel. He started out under the power of a father and seven older brothers. His killing of Goliath changes the course of David's life. He becomes the most successful warrior of Israel. When he returns home from the blood sacrifices of war, the women line the streets and sing, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands" (1 Samuel 18:7). His power grows larger when he becomes king. David won't let God's commandments (against adultery, against murder) get in the way of exercising sovereignty without limit.

Yet here the king's cry betrays his weakness. Despite his life of violence, all in the name of getting what he wants, David can't keep his son alive. This cry testifies to the undoing of his power, of sovereignty that rightly belongs with God, and for that reason David's tears offer the possibility of intimacy with God's grace. We know our God in weakness. And there is nothing weaker than someone overwhelmed with a cry. Tears are a sacrament that comes upon us when we accept our weakness.

AUGUST 15

WISDOM'S HOUSE

PROVERBS 9:1-6; PSALM 34:9-14;
EPHESIANS 5:15-20; JOHN 6:51-58

"Wisdom has built her house," we read in Proverbs 9:1. God's wisdom is personified as a construction worker, a builder. When the house is ready, she throws a party for everyone in her town. "Come, eat my food and drink the wine," she says, inviting the neighborhood to her feast (9:5).

In John's gospel, Jesus becomes the woman in Proverbs 9. Jesus takes the form of Wisdom personified, when the Incarnate One offers bread and wine—the bread of life and the cup of salvation, our communion in

Christ's life. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them," says Jesus (John 6:56). Jesus offers his life as the wisdom of God, communion as an invitation to live in the way of wisdom, to abide in her dwelling, in God's house. As biblical scholar Raymond E. Brown argued, "in drawing this portrait of Jesus, the evangelist has capitalized on an identification of Jesus with personified Wisdom."

Church life is our response to Wisdom's call, an invitation Jesus repeats, although he offers his body as her house. To be members of the body of Christ is to dwell in the house Wisdom has constructed. We share our communion meals at the tables Wisdom built.

AUGUST 22

WHEN PEACE OFFENDS

JOSHUA 24:1-2, 14-18; PSALM 34:15-22;
EPHESIANS 6:10-20; JOHN 6:56-69

In Ephesians, we're commissioned "to proclaim the gospel of peace" (6:15). This life of peace involves conflict with enemies, a nonviolent clash with evil: "Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers ... against spiritual forces of evil" (6:12). This peace is not quietism. Pacifism is not passivism. Instead, the peaceable gospel is an incursion against violence's reign in our communities.

During the Trump years, my congregation was part of a coalition of churches that housed undocumented neighbors threatened with deportation. Church properties became protective sanctuaries. Hundreds of community members volunteered to provide day and night accompaniment for the person who lived for two years at our church—all of us ready for nonviolent confrontation with the authorities, were ICE agents to invade the church.

Proclaiming the gospel of peace put our congregation in conflict with the Department of Homeland Security. Our struggle against harmful federal policies made us enemies of neighbors who demanded the use of force to expel Latinx immigrants

**PEACE IS NOT QUIETISM.
PACIFISM IS NOT PASSIVISM.**

from our communities. I still have the hate mail our church received, and I haven't yet deleted the messages threatening my own deportation. Racists dismiss the difference between citizen and noncitizen; they just want brown people sent away, regardless of our documentation status.

The gospel of peace will offend those invested in the U.S. racialized order for their identity as citizens. In a society organized by means of policing the borders of citizenship, peace involves the costly work of organizing acts of resistance against evil powers.

AUGUST 29

LOVE POEMS

SONG OF SOLOMON 2:8-13; PSALM 45:1-9;
JAMES 1:17-27; MARK 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

"Had the Torah not been given," Rabbi Akiva ben Joseph said, "the Song of Songs would have sufficed to guide the world." Akiva, the great sage of the second century, says this collection of love poems would have been enough scripture to nurture our faith. Surprisingly, the book never explicitly names God. Instead, we're drawn into romantic liaisons and carnal intimacies. "You have ravished my heart with a glance of your eyes" (4:9). A lover calls out to a beloved, "Arise, my love ... and come away" (2:10).

There is enough of God in these love poems because heavenly love pierces through our earthly loves. We are corporeal, we know love through our flesh—our embodied mind, our enfleshed heart, our incarnate soul, the physicality of our spirituality. *La teología es un poema del cuerpo* ("theology is a poem of the body"), writes theologian Rubem Alves in *Variations on Life and Death—el cuerpo orando / el cuerpo diciendo sus esperanzas* ("the body in prayer / bodies speaking their hopes"). This life we have, this body, is the site of God's revelations—divine likenesses in human form. We don't know God other than through the flesh.

Even though God is not named, we hear God in the breath that gives voice to the lovers' call and response—a love from heaven invoked in their earthly desire. With our brief lives we give each other fleeting moments to draw close to an invisible God, the one whose presence bears our loves. ♦

"Preaching the Word," Sojourners' online resource for Bible study and sermon preparation, is available at sojo.net/ptw.

Guest H'rumpus



EAT YOUR VEGGIES

By Joey Chin

In late April 2021, the food website Epicurious made the decision to stop publishing recipes with beef to “encourage more sustainable cooking.” The move sparked an immediate backlash. But I must admit that I would hardly care if every beef entrée were wiped from the internet, so long as the recipes that remained included a “jump to recipe” button so that I did not have to spend 20 minutes scrolling through a 50,000-word memoir about how a particular dish made its way through 17 generations of your family. But alas, it seems that for the time being we are stuck with far too many food platforms doubling up as literary agencies.

Along with facing criticism, Epicurious also won a fair amount of praise. Supporters noted that meat production is one of the most significant contributors to climate change and an ever-warming planet. As a result, over the past few years a number of people have begun to identify as “flexitarians.”

Contrary to my initial belief, these are not people who like to tell others about their bench press record. They are actually folks who generally do not eat meat but might make a few rare exceptions. If most Americans became flexitarian or even just cut cow out of their diet, this could make a significant impact. I do recognize that it is incredibly difficult to get most Americans to do anything for the common good unless it involves the words “listen,” “to,” “Dolly,” and “Parton,” but I actually believe that with a charismatic spokesperson

YES, IT IS A BIT MORBID FOR TWO VEGETABLES TO TELL KIDS IT'S TIME TO START EATING THEIR FELLOW PRODUCE.

at the forefront of a flexitarian campaign, this could get off the ground.

As far as spokespeople, there are several politicians, scientists, and activists who could easily lead the way toward a more sustainable diet, but I think the two individuals best suited for the job would be Bob and Larry. No, not Sen. Bob Menendez and Gov. Larry Hogan. I'm talking about Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber from the hit children's TV show *VeggieTales*. Yes, it is a little bit morbid for two vegetables to tell kids it's time to start eating their fellow produce. Cows at least have the sense to recommend that people eat chicken instead. But it's also a little morbid that this planet is on fire, so it all kind of evens out, don't you think?

I personally did not grow up watching *VeggieTales*, apart from the occasional times when my Sunday school teacher would put on a VHS tape because they woke up late and forgot it was the fourth Sunday YET AGAIN. But I'm absolutely convinced that if the next generation talks about this group of personified vegetables with half as much nostalgia as my friends do, adding in a climate episode where Bob and Larry get eaten but the planet thrives is our paramount duty. Just imagine how fun it would be to hear kids in the hallway after church telling their parents about how they got to watch the episode where Saul the Soy Protein Concentrate and Barnabas the Bean morphed into an Impossible Burger.

And who knows, if this campaign is successful maybe the veggies could add a few more episodes with some new, healthy friends tackling other pressing issues—like marijuana legalization with Wilberforce the Weed. Until then, decrease the steaks and increase the kale because Bob and Larry are ready to save the planet. ♦

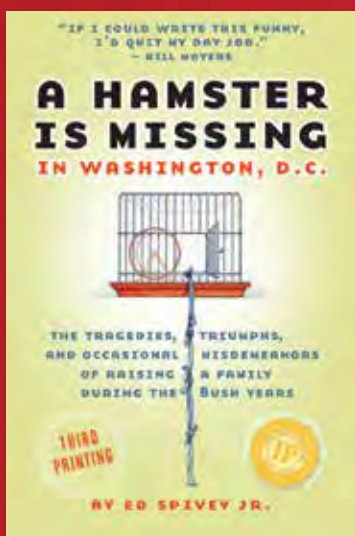
Joey Chin, a former Sojourners fellow, is an elementary school teacher in Redmond, Wash.

Once in a generation a book shocks the literary world with its brilliance.

The wait is over. *Sojourners'* award-winning humorist Ed Spivey Jr. has just published his second book of columns and it's even longer than the first one! *Washingtonia* recounts what's happened in the nation's capital since 2010, and spares no one the scathing force of the author's legendary wit. (That's right, Mitch McConnell, be afraid.) But despite the traumas and debilitating crises during those long years, Ed dug deep and found the funny, even if people begged him not to.

His 2010 book, one of the few published that year with the word "hamster" in the title, won the Gold Medal Award for Humor from the Independent Book Publishers Association, and is now in its third printing.

Both are available at politics-prose.com.



This is not that book.

(But it's funnier.)

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